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ABSTRACT

In this high tech era when nations are competing fiercely for every edge, America's educational institutions are being accused of producing an army of illiterates who cannot read their graduation diplomas or locate the United States on a world map. The most significant change over the past 30 years is surely the environment surrounding the lives of the students who are presently being taught. The breakdown of the family unit, the rise of immigrants in the public schools, and a rush toward specialization in almost every subject have changed the educational environment. Many scholars are even beginning to treat the media as co-equals with the family and religion as the central shaping force in culture today. Led by Marshall McLuhan, some have argued that electronic media and print media of the past are fundamentally different. Television is now the most successful and most influential medium of all. Newspapers have been hard hit, and a striving after simplicity has resulted, with some suggesting that now speed is this nation's addiction. But having an informed citizenry is vital to the lifeblood of democracy. Thus, the challenges facing education in this new media age are staggering, with some scholars suggesting that all students take some sort of media education course. (Twenty-four references and a biographical sketch of the author are attached.) (HB)

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**RANCHO SANTIAGO COLLEGE
SECOND ANNUAL
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**THE
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EDUCATION IN THE MEDIA AGE

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*Rancho Santiago College
Second Annual Faculty Lecture*

*The Dumbing of America:
Education in the Media Age*

by

Terry Wallace Bales

*January 5, 1989
Phillips Hall*

"This is the age of the journalist more than the age of the artist, the teacher, the pastor. It is the age of 'non-fiction' because imagination cannot keep up with the fantastic daily realities."

Eric Severeid
CBS News

A popular business magazine recently likened the crisis facing America's schools to the challenge presented our military just after Pearl Harbor (*Fortune*, November 7, 1988). This time the shortage does not involve tanks or planes, but brainpower. Many companies are complaining that they cannot find enough workers who possess even the rudimentary communications or writing skills to handle entry level positions. In this high tech era when nations are competing fiercely for every mental edge, America's educational institutions are being accused of producing an army of illiterates who cannot read their graduation diplomas or locate the United States on a world map.

How did we reach this abysmal state of collective dumbness? And so soon after landing a man on the moon! Blame is easy to assess. There are many scholars currently making fortunes writing best-sellers about the decline and fall of practically everything. While I too believe that cultural literacy is a noble goal and that we all need a shared sense of heritage and national pride, we are dwelling far too much on the problems without really seeking to understand the root causes of the dilemma nor do we seem to be progressing towards viable solutions that will work for our students and provide us instructors with peace of mind and a renewed feeling of accomplishment. What we do not need is intellectual snobbery and finger-pointing to the detriment of encouraging performance from our students.

To begin, we must ask the question, "Are things really all that different than they were a generation or two ago?" In the midst of all the student-bashing currently going on, we tend to forget in our nostalgic stupor for the good ol' days, that some of our classmates were not exactly mental giants who were reciting poetry, reading

the classics, solving the mysteries of calculus, and waxing philosophical about the vagaries of the universe. To be honest, I see little difference in reading the Allan Blooms (*The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*) and E. D. Hirsch (*Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*) of today than with wading through historian Richard Hofstadter's 1963 classic *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, penned as a response to the educational community's gnashing of teeth and collective guilt trip after the Russians beat us into outer space by orbiting Sputnik around the globe. In fact, even though many of us in the academic community have been able to form alliances with those in government and the business world to commiserate about what really does ail our schools, there are just as many in the public at large who distrust the intelligentsia. Hofstadter wrote of the fears spread by McCarthyites of having Communism being dispensed by the eggheads in every classroom. While we may not be politicized as much ideologically as in the 1950s, we more recently have had to face, especially here in California, a different form of fundamentalist attack from those who feel like Howard Jarvis that taxpayers should not undergo the burden of supporting public education with their pocketbooks. This may explain why we tend to see pragmatic politicians get elected to office while the real brain(truster)s gravitate to advisory positions.

If anything has changed in the past thirty years, it is the environment surrounding the children (and adults) we are trying to educate. Ever since Horace Mann began preaching the need for universal mass education in the early 19th Century, public schools have shared with the family and religion the task of preparing young people to mature into responsible and self-sufficient adults. But the family unit has changed dramatically since the 1950s when two out of three American clans consisted of a father who was the bread-winner and a mother who spent most of her time at home. Today fewer than 20 percent fit that description. Many women now head single-parent families while two incomes are necessary for the more traditional partnership to survive economically. Devoid of much quantitative or qualitative time with their parents, many youngsters are practically raising themselves. Even if education is revered in the home, there are so many distractions to tempt or threaten even the most conscientious student of today. How can one focus on homework when gang members ridicule your attempts at trying to be somebody, when your parents are constantly bickering, or when your best friend overdoses on drugs? Even in the status-conscious suburbs there is a lot of peer pressure to try unprotected sex or drink to excess which makes the relevance of that Monday morning English exam seem a bit hazy. Compounding all these outside diversions that lessen the respect

for or seeming need of an education is the fact that today nearly 75 percent of all high school teens work at least 20 hours a week. Are those earnings necessary to family subsistence? Will teens save for college or are they spoiling themselves so much that it will be hard to break away from the steady income? While learning some job skills on site might be worthwhile, how much does it distract from learning lessons that may be more valuable in the long haul? If they do delay higher education, will they really want to learn when they get to college or just earn a degree?

Add to this equation two other prominent obstacles. In Santa Ana as in many other places across this nation, the education system has been inundated by a new wave of immigrants. Our local unified district is now 75 percent minority with 40 different dialects being represented. Our challenge is that for us to successfully educate, we must first learn as much as we can about these diverse cultures. Then we must persuade our newcomers that acculturation is in the best interests of all. The faculties of several of our major universities--including Stanford and the University of California here in the Golden State--are currently debating the merits of teaching a classical education through tradition-bound courses like Western Civilization or expanding beyond to include information on minorities, women, and cultures not necessarily associated with Anglo-European thought. Hopefully a logical compromise will prevail.

A second factor is the rush to specialization in many areas of study. While such attention to disciplines has always been the province of the college, Hirsch and others believe that a cafeteria-style education is beginning too early at the lower levels. This may be the reason why we in higher education have to spend much valuable time in catching our students up with what they should have been able to master in secondary schools. Rather than focusing on acquiring a factual body of knowledge that can bind us together, the majority of high schools seem to have developed a shopping mall-like directory of courses stressing social skills that might be of immediate gratification, but of little long-term substance. One cannot really engage in critical thinking without such a common pool of information. Arguing over what should be included on the list can itself be a valuable tool as we try to relate current events to past achievement. Hirsch appropriately places the responsibility to go beyond the simplest forms of reading, writing, and regurgitating on the lap of those teachers who do not demand enough of their students. It still amazes me that some who take my general education courses and who say they intend to transfer to a four-year school are petrified when you assign them a three-to-five page analysis paper. Many in the class have never had such a task asked of them before, yet they are going to have to function in a world that is rapidly replacing brawny manual labor

with brainy professions that emphasize services and communications.

This litany of barriers facing educators is familiar turf by now. What we need to do is emulate the example of teacher-heroes like the celebrated Jaime Escalante, who induces achievement by having his students ignore such outside influences as much as is possible when they stand and deliver in his classroom. Yet Hirsch dismisses some of these environmental factors too easily in his rush to place blame at the doorstep of the elementary and secondary schools. Too quickly allowed to slip off the hook is the one component that I would like to address in the balance of this study--the role of the mass media in influencing and impeding our educative process. It is my contention that the media has played a major hand in both the dumbing and the numbing of America's students. Yet we must be careful not to use television or rock music or popular magazines as convenient scapegoats without understanding their hold on much of what passes for culture in this country. We also should seek ways to utilize the power of mass communications to achieve our educational goals. The chore will not be easy. Though mass culture is only about 150 years old, the true nature of its effects on society in general really are just beginning to be studied. Yet many sociologists already are willing to elevate the media into co-equal status with the family, the church, and the school as the primary institutions that affect both cognitive learning and the teaching of social and moral values. Many believe that all of our culture has become "mediated," thus rendering it "mediocre."

First we must grasp the scope of the media's reach. According to the latest research conducted by the National Education Association in September, 1988, the typical American adolescent averages 23 hours a week watching television and more than 60 percent say they do all or most of their homework with the tube on. Such viewing habits mean that by the time they are 18, these children will have witnessed over 15,000 acts of violence while being assaulted with over 25,000 messages from the sponsor. Toss in a movie or two a week, the ever-present rock music blaring from a radio or tape player, the arrival of a video revolution, computer games, and assorted other time-consumers and you begin to appreciate why there seems to be precious scant moments to tackle "boring" school assignments for so many of our youngsters. With so few families fitting the *Father Knows Best* or *Donna Reed* mode of child-rearing, it is easy to see how we can transform a media such as TV into an electronic baby-sitter if not an electronic playmate. For some this becomes a life-long addiction as Marie Winn worried about in her book, *The Plug-in Drug*. Oddly enough only those makers of SONYs and Toshiba--the Japanese--spend more time than Americans in front of the tube with an average of

over seven hours a day per set. Perhaps this makes Japan's much ballyhooed success story in education even more amazing.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian professor, became one of the first to explore just what immense power for good and evil the media possesses. McLuhan switched his scholarly pursuits from Beowulf and Chaucer to this century with his seminal 1964 work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In it he portrayed a conflict between the old print media and the emerging electronic means of communications that it would be wise for all instructors to pay heed to forthwith. In McLuhan's mind, book-learning was dependent on an orderly linear society. Without competition from other forms of communication save word-of-mouth, it was easier to learn to read and to enjoy the pleasure even though it requires more physical exertion than just talking. Many Americans in the late 19th Century who had at least an eighth grade education would digest three or four competing newspapers a day for information and as their chief mode of entertainment. Now less than 40 cities in this entire country have more than a single daily and that one is hard-pressed to attract readers in the under-30 age bracket.

An electronic "all-at-onceness" featuring what McLuhan refers to as an aurile-tactile replacement of the linear society has created a new global village that has simultaneously reduced the size and scope of the world while causing information to explode. In Thomas Jefferson's day, his library of 5,000 volumes was said to constitute nearly all of the accumulated knowledge of Western Civilization. Now American publishers spew forth 30,000 hardback and another 100,000 paperbacks per year as we add width, but perhaps not much breadth, to human understanding. Maybe it is this enormous aggregation of information that causes some to avoid the task of reading or remembering much. Staying informed is not a top priority of the 60 percent of those in this nation said to be "functionally illiterate." This does not mean they cannot read, it means that they choose not to exercise their eyes on the tiny print unless it affords them some immediate pleasure. More romance novels and supermarket tabloids are sold than anything of substantive or lasting value.

Unfortunately, much of our teaching methodology is still trapped back in the linear age of assembly line learning with 30 or 40 students expected to flower and have their work evaluated by a lone teacher. No wonder McLuhan insisted that many precocious youths were dropping out because they felt that when they went to school they were in a sense interrupting their education.

A collateral dilemma is the effect that each change in technology has on society. We barely had adjusted to a world of television when first computers and then video tape players became

available on the home market. Think what a generation raised before radio became the first media in the 1930s to fully nationalize us must think of PCs and electronic graphics. Such swift change has been chronicled by Alvin Toffler and others as "future shock." As each successive wave of traumatic transformation takes place we seem to hide deeper in a nostalgic about-face that tries to carry us back to a simpler time. Educators themselves sometimes are caught up in this lockstep march to the rear in search of a sense of *deja vu*.

A generational gap has been growing tremendously since at least the 1950s. There was a time when youth imitated and sought to grow up as the equal of their elders. Now that process is somewhat reversed. A youth culture began to sprout in the Fifties, fueled by, of all things, the growing practice of parents bestowing an allowance on their progeny. Those who had suffered through a Great Depression and sacrificed during a Second World War wanted to make sure that their offspring had it better. The immediate result was that those manipulators of the media realized they had a potential new market to exploit. In their search to be different, these young rebels without a cause adopted the slightly salacious rhythm and blues beat of Black America to use as a rallying cry against parents who just didn't understand them. Rock 'n' roll was born and had to be propagandized to be made acceptable. Listen again to Chuck Berry's hits from that era like "Roll Over Beethoven," "School Days," and "Johnny B. Goode" to fully appreciate the selling job going on by the record companies. TV fanned the flames by according guest appearances to Elvis and by legitimizing the whole process through everyone's favorite chaperon, Dick Clark, and his squeaky clean image-maker *American Bandstand*. This early rock history makes for a great lesson plan in sociology, but the music's influence certainly has sent out at least mixed signals about the value of schooling. Remember that ol' Johnny B. could never read or write too well, but he could strum a mean guitar good enough to be a highly paid star, and provide a fantasy career for many teens caught up in the new music's fervor.

While rock may contain its share of pure poetry and may be the most uniquely individualistic of all the mass media, much of it is simple and repetitive. This statement could be extended to include all forms of mass communications and may serve as a prime target of their condemnation as institutions counted on to foster learning. Television especially tends to simplify complex messages. Because of time constraints, TV seldom lends itself to being an open-ended forum. Every dilemma seems to be resolved in neat little 30- or 60-minute packages and the important "word from our sponsor" usually means that a "Superproduct" can thwart a potential crisis in even shorter bursts of 30 or 60 seconds. For

many, their attention span has been reduced to needing a break about every seven minutes just like on the tube. TV itself has become so tedious that a growing number of viewers are utilizing their remote controls to zip through an ever-growing number of channels to find a few seconds of un-interrupted pleasure.

But we should not be too quick to judge the technology of the media. Any who would teach should instead become more familiar with the ideas and business practices of those allowed to own and run the media. TV is not the culprit, but many of those who have tried to mold it into a money-making machine should be scrutinized and critiqued more assiduously. McLuhan understood this when he teased us with his most memorable line, "The medium is the message." He urged that we study both the form and the content of the media. Those who program TV often argue that they give us what we want, but how can we know if they continue to give us what they give us? The tube's so-called Golden Age is thought to have come early in that medium's history. From 1948 to 1958, television was dominated by live dramatic anthologies like the *U.S. Steel Hour* and *Playhouse 90* that featured uplifting dialogue and a modicum of chase scenes and brutish violence. But film (and now video tape) proved to be more economical in that you could re-run each episode. Ratings became more important than quality. So producers began cranking out shows that followed two basic network dictums—"give us the same, but different" and "aim for the lowest common denominator." The former means to seek to duplicate last year's hit with the same type of program, only change the cast and locale and don't be too obvious. A classic recent example was CBS trying to cash in on NBC's success with *The Cosby Show* by hiring Flip Wilson to star in a family sitcom. "LCD" attempts to cross all demographic barriers with the type of series that will appeal to all. The result of such crass creativity is a pablum-like formula that might fill in the blank hours in a person's schedule, but seldom asks much of its viewers beyond passive awareness that what they are watching seems vaguely familiar. Even when commercial TV does attempt to present a higher form of culture it usually sugar coats the experience. For example, in the 1970s CBS gave us the Bolshoi Ballet from Moscow, but the performance was hosted by popular star Mary Tyler Moore to assure a-ratings success and plug her own series on the network.

Unfortunately, such business acumen has allowed television to become the most successful and the most-dependent upon medium of all. This has in turn altered the content and performance of the other media. To survive, the movies developed larger screens, 3-D, more graphic violence (now being matched on TV), and nudity. Radio changed from a network-dominated showcase of talent that fled to TV into a local medium dependent

on musical formats and disc jockeys who quickly adapted to rock and became the teenager's guide into a sub-culture little understood by parents. Magazines switched away from general circulation weeklies like *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. These had served for many as a frame of reference to record important national events. Replacing them were specialized publications more capable of delivering a specific audience (albeit more narrow-minded) to the advertiser.

Afternoon newspapers in the larger cities were especially hard hit. By the time commuters reach home and take delivery of their paper, they are apt to set it aside and watch TV news which is more immediate and timely. Surveys reveal that nearly two-thirds of all Americans say they rely almost solely on television for their understanding of current events. But if you were to take all the words scripted for a half hour network evening newscast, they would not fill up the front page of a local newspaper. Conciseness and brevity are the watch words in TV journalism. Seldom does a story exceed 90 seconds in length. For those not paying close attention, this blur of images can be confusing. A recent study pointed out that in a geography test, American teens kept placing Beirut in Northern Ireland because often on the nightly news lineup there were back-to-back stories involving terrorism in Lebanon and in Belfast. One key continuing advantage of print over the electronic media is that a newspaper, a book, or a magazine allows you to read over material that might appear foggy on first glance. Perhaps the rewind button on the modern VCR will afford us a similar second chance when studying videos.

The latest evidence that such striving for simplicity leads to simple-mindedness may just be America's newspaper *USA Today*. The Gannett Publishing Company realized in 1981 that we seemed to have been anesthetized by TV. So they launched a national paper for those who don't have time to read a newspaper. To show that they understood television's grip on society and its ability to substitute a glitzy glittering package for any content of substance, Gannett opted to sell its five-times-a-week baby in vending machines that resemble computer terminals or TV monitors. The paper's grid-like decor is full of lists and charts and polls and graphic designs, but the stories have been reduced to four or five brief paragraphs. Only one article per section is allowed to jump to another page. When the publication quickly rose to four million sales a day to lead the journalistic pack, you can be sure that many struggling dailies began to imitate *USA Today*. The result, a continuation of the dumbing down-process. Instead of fostering learning by carefully using a vocabulary that becomes self-explanatory as it educates and informs, many newspapers instead opt not to challenge the reader's mind. So *USA Today* has become the Cliff Notes' equivalent of the more sagacious New York Times.

And as if that wasn't shocking enough, Gannett now has decided to reduce our attention span another notch or two with a televised version of its compressed newspaper. Are we ready for *USA Today: The Television Show*? As Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Howard Rosenberg wrote in his vituperative review of the TV show that copied a newspaper that copied TV, "(it)...is designed for mental shut-ins. If your mind has never left the house, this is for you. If you wish *Entertainment Tonight* used simpler words, this is for you. If you wish the *National Enquirer* had more pictures, this is for you....Judging by the premiere, *USA Today* is 'tainment'--infotainment minus the info. It doesn't fill a void, it is one." (*Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1988).

Rosenberg believes that such programs point up the fact that speed is our addiction. All we seem to want is a taste, a hint, a sample, a teasing headline--anything that allows us to shortcut the full experience of life. No wonder it is difficult to get and keep the attention of a class over the span of a semester. But who can blame today's programmers for using all the bells and whistles at their disposal. This is the video age of rapid edits, blackout effects, and rotating wipes that constantly surround us with new information and without a let-up. Today's students seem to understand this and can digest the rapid-fire and often subliminal messages being targeted for them in rock videos and chic ads for products like bluejeans. It is the special effects not the plot-line that often determines the box office appeal of today's movies. Laugh tracks guide us in case we can't recognize the humor. Above all else, don't make the masses think too much!

The real problem with productions like *USA Today: The Television Show* is that they too often substitute trivial gossip for informative news. They are part of a publicity hype that has trapped us in what social historian Daniel Boorstin calls an age of "pseudo-events." Spontaneous news becomes seemingly less important than those events that are staged for maximum exposure. The trouble with hype is that the build-up usually overshadows the event. Take the Super Bowl for instance. By the time the media has interviewed everyone in sight, and speculated on the outcome, isn't the game itself usually a letdown? Imagine what emotional consequences this renders for the young who get excited only to be disappointed. It reminds one of the sad refrain from the Peggy Lee song "Is That All There Is?" These pseudo-events are distracting to education for another reason. They often launch the careers of pseudo-celebrities who Boorstin says are "known because they are known." But many of our youth idolize the next hot rock band or sensation-seeking film starlet whose faces suddenly grace half the magazines in sight and are booked for appearances on all the talk shows. Is this hero worship and the money it costs for the privilege to get to know these (false) idols being misplaced?

We probably should not be surprised that many in this nation are gullible enough to be taken in by such chicanery. Most have not become the rational beings that Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Locke and Jefferson hoped we would. Freud was closer to understanding our true nature, and advertisers who have studied him have learned that sex sells most products. Emotion overpowers reason. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels counted on this weakness when he used the German media to spread The Big Lie around so often that it began to sound like truth to the highly cultured citizens of that beleaguered nation. P.T. Barnum remains our patron saint. That clever pitchman knew that all he had to do was get the customers into the tent to fleece them. Suckers seldom ask for their money back. Journalist H.L. Mencken put it best when he said that no one has ever lost a dime underestimating the taste of the American public. And the problem is that our trash is the best trash available. It even becomes collectible. Where else but in America would confessed wrongdoers at the highest levels like Nixon's Watergate Gang fool us by subverting the truth and then fool us again by exacting \$25 a pop from us for the book on how they did it?

The most recent hybridization of hype and trash has to be the so-called "Reality TV" or "Tabloid Television" programs hosted by the likes of Morton Downey Jr. and Geraldo Rivera. Here the tube's usually docile talk shows become combat zones with attempts at eye-gouging and name-calling that rival even the more popular pseudo-event wrestling--for attention. Does this genre foster genuine controversy or just appeal to lowbrow sensationalism? Hurling vulgar epithets has been a lesson plan on TV since the socially relevant sitcoms like *All in the Family* began to appear in the early 1970s. Who can forget the memorable "Up your nose with a rubber hose" line from the less relevant *Welcome Back, Kotter*? Even the commercials name-call these days, trying to point out product advantages that usually aren't. Radio of late has chimed in with "shock jocks" like New York's Howard Stern and Jay Thomas of Los Angeles being singled out for investigation by the Federal Communications Commission for their indecency and hooliganism on the public airwaves. Such disrespect carries over to the classroom where good manners become yet another lesson plan for the harried teacher to work into an already crammed day.

But affecting such attitude change on the part of the student will not be easy. Many of our youngsters have grown up identifying with the outlaw and not necessarily the good guy. A psychologist discovered that many who frequently watched *Howdy Doody* in the early Fifties actually cheered on the mischievous antics of Clarabell the seltzer-squirting clown and couldn't stand that goody-goody Howdy, who was portrayed as an all-American boy whose virtuous behavior was probably out of the realm of

possibility for most of the little tykes. There used to be just one or two class clowns and the sympathy of their classmates when the little Bozos misbehaved usually swung to the teacher. Now in the age of TV, students at the lowest levels are more sophisticated and less shy about performing for others. Heaven help the poor instructor with 35 Eddie Murphys on his/her roll sheet. Outrageous behavior draws attention. Look at "The Boz" (Brian Bosworth) of football fame. Talk mixes with violent action on the field to form his rebellious (and quite salable) persona. And to demonstrate his popularity, Boz has an autobiography on the stands at the ripe old age of 22.

To teach students of any level today in the Media Age thus requires an understanding that they are learning many lessons from many different sources that may have more impact on them than anything you can conjure up in your classroom. As Michael Real suggests in his *Mass-Mediated Culture*, even education itself has been mediated in the form of *Sunrise Semester* and other such for-credit TV courses. Nearly as many receive weekly religious training from the electronic media as from established churches. It is little wonder that TV evangelists like Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell decided to build television studios to travel the circuit through the air waves rather than in person. Unfortunately this could become another form of alienation and loss of human contact. As with many families who seem to enjoy little time to communicate with each other, how does one really seek out religious nurturance from a pastor who is 3,000 miles away and only appears for an hour a week on Channel 13? The cost of the electronic church is immense and, as recent headlines have suggested, there are many all-too-human preachers who abuse the fame and power the medium of TV bestows upon them.

Notice also how pop psychology is being dispensed, seemingly for free, by such practitioners as Dr. Ruth, Joyce Brothers, Dear Abby, and even Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey. Economics and business information seems more important to today's consumers, so the media has responded by creating specialized magazines, adding whole sections to newspapers, and making a star of Louis Rukeyser on PBS's *Wall Street Week*. What could be more convenient than a *Home Shopping Network* so that you can order goods by that cellular telephone you purchased last week rather than fighting the crowds at the mall? Indeed a whole philosophy of life can be engendered by any number of our popular magazines. Hugh Hefner thought so when he tried to disseminate his hedonistic views through his *Playboy* Advisor, but for many, the centerfold kept getting in the way. Even our recreational needs can be satisfied by the media. Beyond just becoming sofa vegetables by watching one sporting event after the other, one can build up a sweat by plopping a workout tape in the video player.

Having an informed citizenry is vital to the lifeblood of our democracy. But interesting our students in political involvement today in the Electronic Age is becoming more difficult. Television has taken some of the joy out of the experience by wresting control of the process away from the local party's grassroots organizations. Candidates from the level of mayor of major metropolises on up to President know that the TV photo opportunity and the short sound bite are more important to being elected than delving into important issues. The recent Bush vs. Dukakis debacle, with all of its attendant negativism and name-calling, should have been booked on Geraldo's show. Media consultants have packaged office-seekers since the "I Like Ike" campaign of 1952. Young, would-be voters find it hard to distinguish between politicians and corn flakes since both are being sold to us through 30-second spots. Running poll results almost nightly along with the cliché shots of the candidates shaking hands at the factory gate makes for the impression that this is a horse race, not an important decision, vital to the future of our country. Of course, when those we elect then cause scandals in office and operate just the opposite of the way they promised to when seeking our votes, is it any mystery why some are turned off by the whole endeavor and cynicism mounts for paying any attention at all to the process?

Covering political campaigns is just one example of how the mass media attempts to set the agenda by which we conduct our lives. An age-old question is whether, in so doing, the media merely reflects reality or creates it. As the home environment weakens and schools battle to make up lost ground, it seems reasonable to expect that the media will continue to play an important role—for good or evil—in the lives of our children. Unfortunately, TV especially has treated the kids badly over the past few years. While we continue to celebrate noble achievements like the Children's Television Workshop's famed *Sesame Street*, now in its 20th year, most of the programming on commercial TV for school-age youngsters represents that vast wasteland former FCC Chairman Newton Minow warned us about in 1961. Many of the cartoon shows on the networks are really just program-length commercials intended to sell an endless array of toys and games to their susceptible viewers. The real advertisements surrounding the cartoons have been accused by groups like Action for Children's Television of being too numerous and for products like sugary snacks that are harmful to the kiddies. Since the Reagan Administration fostered de-regulation of the FCC by-laws governing children's shows, the networks have seemingly abdicated their responsibilities to children and parents alike. Only seven percent of all network programming is earmarked for youngsters and most of that is on Saturday

mornings. This means that during the early evening hours when kids watch a lot of TV, most of the shows they see are intended for adults. If parents do not discuss what their kids are watching with them, those impressionable youngsters will probably bring their questions to class. Within reason, it would be advisable for the adults to help select what their offspring turn on in the first place. If such value-training does not go on in the home, these rudderless children will turn to their teachers for help. *The Wall Street Journal* recently reported that the Baltimore school district has added 20 minutes to the day to handle "character education." This moral literacy is necessary because the media often sends out mixed messages. Stop smoking announcements populate the TV set, but some characters continue to light up, and the habit is still fully encouraged in print ads. Alcoholism becomes a dramatic problem solved on an afternoon special, but later that same night a popular night-time soap star guzzles a social drink on *Dynasty*. Schools launch "Just Say No!" anti-drug campaigns, but daily television ads tell us that our problems are just a pill away from instant relief. Public health officials warn us about "safe sex," but rock videos suggest sex is fun.

Just when instructors were getting used to the role TV and the other media were playing in the education process and how to incorporate film, magazines, and newspapers (remember *The Weekly Reader*?) into the curriculum, the technology began to change again. Cable TV and video tape recorders have broadened the choices for young viewers in addition to making more material available for teachers to enliven their class discussions. Digital TV sets are now on the market that allow us to watch two or more shows simultaneously. Eventually the home vidiot will be able to choose which of several camera shots from the location he wants to put up on the new 84-inch screen. Fibre optics will some day soon replace cable and satellites, making possible more interactive TV. We will be able to combine TV, computers, and facsimile machines to provide thousands of communications channels. Besides viewing for entertainment, such two-way equipment will make it probable that we will do most of our banking, bill-paying chores, and reservation requests from home. In fact, more and more people will skip the rush hour traffic jams one or two days a week to conduct business without leaving the living room. Perhaps that will allow some parents more time to interact with their children. Meanwhile, computer terminals and specially designed educational video games are transforming a growing number of elementary schools into palaces of wonderment, renewing enthusiasm for learning among students and teachers alike. Libraries, too, are rapidly becoming electronic data retrieval hubs from which we can call up information from our home or school computers and receive a permanent copy on the

fax machine. In centers of futurist study such as MIT's Media Lab, researchers have constructed an interactive-documentary project called Athena (a video/computer work station fed by a half dozen videodisc players). Rather than just passively viewing an informational program, you will be able to halt it and ask for a speaker's credentials or for more background data on places mentioned. For example, when someone talks about a bridge, the viewer can call up current and past maps of the area, vintage photos of the bridge and its complete history.

But the educator should be aware that such 21st Century Space Age technology carries with it some potentially steep price tags, not the least of which is the capital needed to assure that the educational infrastructure of the future will continue to meet the needs of our society. We must guard against a growing tendency to separate into two inequitable groups--The Haves vs. The Have Nots. Nearly every person in this nation has access to a TV set. For the past thirty years that meant that most viewers were turned to one of three network-controlled stations. This guaranteed that for the most part we all were sharing the same experiences. But with cable, satellite dishes, and VCRs available to those who can afford what is still a luxury for most, the messages are becoming more fragmented and specialized. Having a multitude of choices also means that students are going to have to be trained to assume more of the "gatekeeper's role" in such a complex society. Education must pay more attention to making sure that our future generations will be bright enough to select wisely from such a varied menu in addition to their receiving basic career tutelage. Learning to learn and learning how to better spend leisure time will become an even more vital part of the educative process as we live longer (and hopefully ever more productive lifetimes).

We also must be vigilant about maintaining a sense of privacy and the dignity of humanity in this new Media Age. Though 1984 has passed, we must not forget the possibilities of an Orwellian nation where Big Brother rules from a giant screen and the drone-like workers are programmed by newspeak. Some of our most brilliant minds are engaged in inventing even more fascinating machinery. But what good will it do the masses if they are unable to control the technology? A favorite subject of science fiction is the creation of a false utopia where mankind has allowed the computers to think for him. We all remember that nefarious robotic "HAL" from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Will we ever again be able to convince students that they must understand the need to learn to count or to spell when they have calculators on their watches and dictionaries programmed into their IBM PCs? Aldous Huxley warned of just such a Brave New World where there was "no leisure from pleasure, not a moment to sit down and think...safe on

the solid ground of daily labour and distraction."

The challenges confronting our educational system are immense. It will not be easy to reach a generation weaned on the teachings of Big Bird and aroused into adulthood by the sexy stimuli of MTV. The first step is to realize the grip the media has on many of our students. Somehow we must persuade them that there is more to life than "Miller time," if they are going to be "all that they can be." Perhaps one way to incorporate this insatiable appetite to be entertained into an educational asset is to harness the students' already heightened sense of "media (or visual) literacy" into class projects that will offer an alternative to written research. Though I have a vested interest since I teach such Media and Society courses, I encourage others to find some possible application for using VCRs, tape recorders, radio, TV, film, magazines, newspapers, and the new electronic graphics or desktop publishing systems. Such visual assignments foster teamwork, require writing skills to complete a script, advance critical thinking by means of problem-solving, and usually teach the importance of meeting deadlines—all traits valued by prospective employers. Ethical dilemmas also might be confronted in such projects, which could deal in part with some of the social issues such as alcoholism and life in a broken home that have hindered schooling. Most students have access to some equipment and allowing them to produce from scratch is another beneficial by-product of the project.

One of my colleagues at San Diego State, Prof. Don Sneed, even thinks media studies should be mandatory at all institutions. He supported his contention recently in an article in *Editor and Publisher* magazine by stating, "We are inundated by information and surrounded by the media. Yet no hue and cry is heard to bring media studies into the curriculum. Perhaps the reason is that such a notion sounds almost like fun, and for goodness sakes, something fun can't also be educational. Or we could erroneously assume that, since the media are ubiquitous, everyone understands all about them." Sneed sees the British moving in the direction of a required media course as they revamp their school system from bottom to top to make it more relevant to the times. Those pranksters at Bowling Green have gone Sneed one better. They have created a Department of Popular Culture that is the center of academic controversy according to a *Rolling Stone* profile published October 6, 1988. While there are those who decry the study of rock music and the influence of TV soap operas on today's youth, other think that some of the most imaginative instruction goes on in such classes.

Beyond realization that media studies might be a valuable general educational requirement, we must also encourage

business to provide more direction and leadership as we retool the schools at all levels. Just throwing money without actually getting involved will not be enough. On the local level companies can tell schools what specific skills they are seeking in new employees. Larger corporations can also encourage their workers to pursue lifelong career advancement classes and cultural enrichment programs in cooperation with local colleges. And we must urge more firms like Merrill Lynch to provide future university scholarships for today's first graders from underprivileged homes if they demonstrate prowess throughout their elementary and secondary years.

Maintaining public support also is vital. It was heartening to see the recent passages of Propositions 78 and 98 in California and to feel a renewed interest in tackling education's key problems. To take the nation out of permanent risk we must convince the students themselves that the adventure is worth the price of admission. We need to combine theoretical knowledge with as much hands-on training as is possible. Specialization might have to take a back seat for awhile as all school levels focus on restoring some sense of cultural literacy. Stressing factual fecundity will further the abilities to reason and to develop sound judgment. Many involved in the fitness craze of late have been willing to strain for gain, but now is also the time to flex the muscle power of our own inboard computer--the brain. Reading and writing must be seen to be as important a regimen of exercise for the body as running and weight-lifting.

We must demand more of our students so that they can master the skills to launch a career, and at the same time, be thoughtful and productive citizens of a democracy that can survive only if they continue to be able to serve and support it. We must discourage the type of advertising one sees in those daytime ads on TV for certain high-priced private trade schools that mislead by stressing how easy it is to learn and how much money the student will make if only they enroll now. Education requires diligent work on the part of both instructor and student--the same type of toil that brought America back after the disaster that befell us on December 7, 1941. I think we are up to the task. The media need not anesthetize, when it can be used to energize. Nor must the teacher be reduced to simply turning on the machinery. Innovation in lesson planning can still spark the imaginative instructor. Using the media and not having the media use us will make the journey fun and exciting.

For Further Study

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TERRY WALLACE BALES



Terry Bales was born in Upland, CA. in 1946 and grew up in that San Bernardino County community. In 1967 he graduated summa cum laude from the University of Southern California as the School of Journalism's outstanding scholar, also earning admittance into Phi Beta Kappa.

Bales received a National Defense Education Act Title IV Fellowship for graduate studies and finished his M.A. in U.S. History at USC in 1969. After leading Whittier High School students to the state Journalism Education Assn. writing championship in 1970, he joined the RSC faculty as el Don adviser. In 12 years, el Don staff members garnered Associated Collegiate Press All-American Newspaper honors in 23 consecutive semesters and captured over 200 Journalism Association of Community College awards.

In 1983, RSC expanded into cable TV and Bales was chosen as the chair of the Telecommunications/Journalism Department. He created and still advises a weekly TV newscast "Around and About Orange County," which has won three straight awards from the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers. In 1987, Bales was selected to become the first recipient of the National College Media Advisers'

Broadcast Journalism Adviser of the Year. He has been invited to conduct seminars at the past two CMA national conventions.

Bales also has taught at Chapman College and UC Irvine and is a member of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences scholarship committee. In addition to his classroom duties, he oversees an annual Journalism Day for Orange County high schools which has attracted such prominent keynote speakers as Connie Chung and Bryant Gumbel. Starting in 1981, Bales has hosted an annual Telecommunications Department "Tribute to a TV Classic," which salutes popular TV series of the past and which raises funds for student scholarships and productions.

Since 1967, he has moonlighted as a United Press International sportswriter, covering the home games of the California Angels and the L.A. Dodgers, Rams, and Kings. Coverage has included stories on five Super Bowls, a dozen Rose Bowls, and six World Series.

Bales lives in Rossmore with his wife Debbie, manager of Industrial Engineers at Disneyland. Last May he received the college's second Annual Faculty Lecturer Award and a Professional Achievement Award.

